

66 COLUMN NEAR  
PHILIPPI, JOSEPHUS,  
CASSIUS DIO, PLINY  
THE YOUNGER, AND  
MILITARY DIPLOMA  
FROM PHILIPPI

## ALL THE EMPEROR'S MEN

### TRAJAN AND THE ARMY

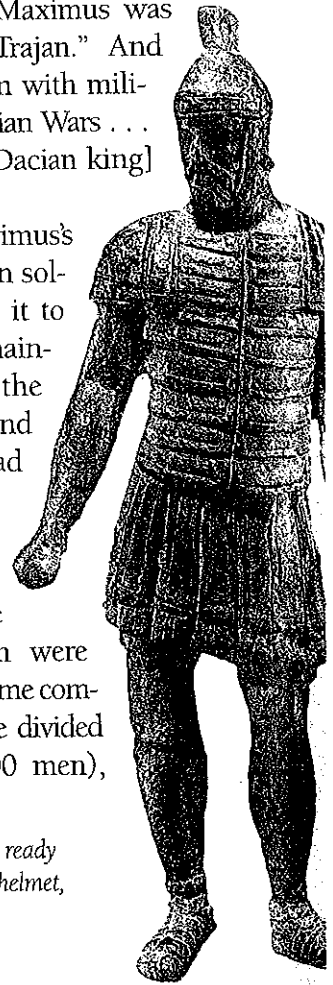
66 Column found near  
Philippi, 115 CE

Tiberius Claudius Maximus began his military career as a lowly cavalryman. During a war between Rome and Dacia (the present-day country of Romania), his courage in battle drew the attention of his officers. Maximus later erected a 9-foot-tall marble column near Philippi in modern-day Greece, to make sure his achievements would be remembered. The inscription tells us that Maximus was “promoted to corporal by the divine Trajan.” And in 106 CE, the emperor presented him with military honors “for his courage in the Dacian Wars . . . because he captured Decebalus [the Dacian king] and brought his head to Trajan.”

That severed head changed Maximus's life. Now he was no longer a common soldier. He was a leader. And he owed it to Trajan, a capable emperor who maintained a good relationship with the army—the large, well-organized, and professional fighting force that had made Rome supreme.

In Trajan's time, the Roman army was divided into thirty legions of 6,000 men each. The soldiers were called legionaries, and all of them were Roman citizens. A senator sent from Rome commanded each legion. The legions were divided into centuries (groups of about 100 men),

*A statue of a legionary soldier from Rome stands ready for battle wearing sandals, protective leggings, a helmet, and armor over his chest.*



each headed by an officer called a centurion, such as Tiberius Claudius Maximus.

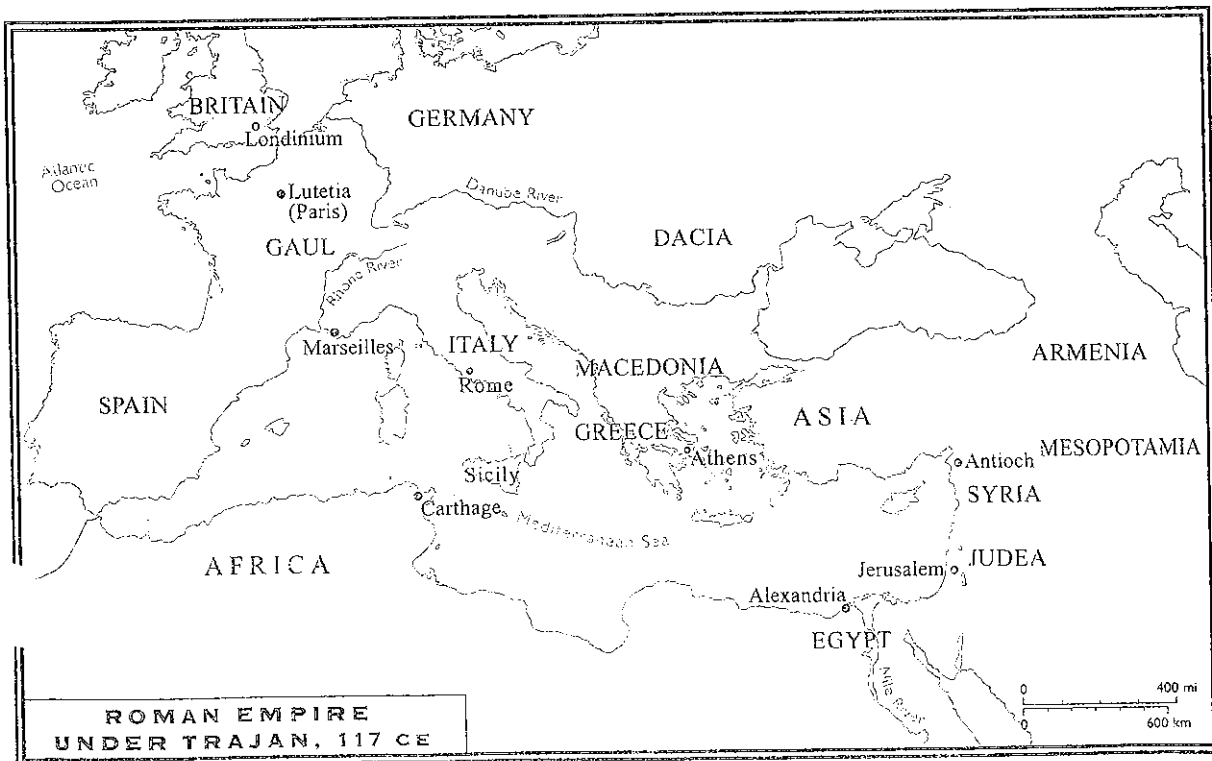
Centurions were the backbone of the army. They enforced discipline and led their men into battle. Centurions were not aristocrats. Like Maximus, they joined the army as foot soldiers or cavalrymen. Although they experienced battle firsthand, they could only hope for promotion if their commanding officers recommended them. Showing great loyalty or courage when it really mattered was how they became officers.

For Maximus, becoming a centurion brought more than the honor of leadership. It also brought a big raise in pay. In

the second century CE, a foot soldier earned 300 *denarii* a year—not much to live on. A centurion's pay was more than 16 times as much. The lowest-paid centurion made 5,000 *denarii*. And the highest-ranking centurion, the *primus pilus* (first lance) who marched at the front of the formation, earned 20,000 *denarii* a year.

### DEAR DAD, SEND MONEY

A soldier's pay did not allow for luxuries. One new recruit wrote home, asking for the money to buy a white horse. He begged his mother to convince Dad to send him the cash. Life would be so much easier if only he had a horse!



66 Josephus, *The Jewish War*,  
75 CE

The early years of the empire saw few wars. During these years the troops were kept busy training, serving as police, and protecting their camps. The army was highly organized and tightly governed. Even Rome's enemies admired its military discipline. The Jewish writer Josephus had fought against the Romans in 66 CE, and although the Romans had defeated his people, Josephus later praised his former enemies: "For the Romans, the wielding of arms does not begin with the outbreak of war. They don't sit idly by in peace time . . . waiting for trouble to strike. Quite the opposite."

66 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*,  
225 CE

A legionary dressed for battle carried a large shield, a sword and two spears. He was well trained in the tactics of attack as well as defense. One battle formation that the Romans invented was called the *testudo* ("turtle"). The historian Cassius Dio tells how it worked in battle:

Heavily armed soldiers carrying oblong or curved shields form the outside of a shell. . . . Facing outward, they enclose the rest of the soldiers. Others—those with flat shields—stand close together in the center and raise their shields over their own heads and the heads of the other soldiers. Nothing but shields can be seen, and all of the men are protected.

Each legion had its own permanent fort made of stone. When on the march, the soldiers built a rectangular camp at each stop. Until 200 BC, legionaries weren't allowed to marry. But many had unofficial wives and children who lived in makeshift towns near the military camps. These women and children were called camp followers. The towns they lived in later developed into such cities as Bonn in Germany and York in Britain.

In peacetime, construction was a big part of the soldiers' lives. They built frontier walls, roads, aqueducts, canals, bridges, arches, baths, and temples. The remains of their labors still dot the landscape in western Europe and North Africa. Among other things, the Romans built 10,000 miles of roads in Italy and the conquered provinces. These roads, made of rock and sand, were designed for marching soldiers,

but they also served merchants and traders. Roman roads lie beneath many modern highways. You can tell if a road in Great Britain or Europe was built on top of an earlier Roman road because it will be arrow-straight. Rome's system of roads is part of its **legacy**.

When parading before visiting officials, Roman soldiers often wore fancy dress uniforms with masks and red plumes on their helmets. This display of power and elegance must have boosted their spirits in quieter times. They also entertained themselves with dice games, visits to bathhouses, and theatrical shows.

After 20 years' service in the military, a legionary was eligible for retirement. He would receive land or the cash equivalent to 14 years' pay. No longer a soldier, he was free to marry and settle down. Most of these men stayed in the provinces near their friends and old comrades.

The army was a big part of the economy of the Roman Empire. It kept money flowing in two directions. People in the provinces had to pay taxes to Rome, which took money out of the provinces. But soldiers posted to the provinces spent their salaries where they lived, which put money back into the local economies. A lot of money changed hands, and people profited on both sides. The provinces became more prosperous under the emperors. And the empire itself grew to its greatest size during Trajan's reign, from 98 to 117 CE.

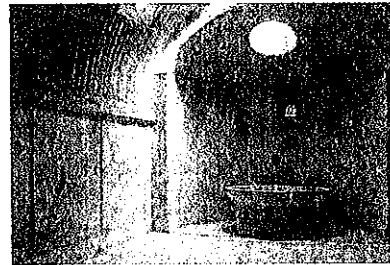
Trajan was different from the emperors before him. For one thing, the emperor Nerva chose Trajan as his successor because of Trajan's abilities. Trajan was not kin to Nerva, nor was he a powerful senator. But Nerva chose him anyway.

Nerva was an elderly senator when he took the throne in 96, after the murder of the tyrant Domitian. Although he ruled for only two years, Nerva started a new tradition that gave Rome excellent government for more than 80 years. Instead of adopting a relative as his successor, the emperor found the man whom he thought would do the best job. And he made a good choice: Trajan, the commander of Rome's forces in Germany.

Another difference between Trajan and his predecessors was that during his reign, Trajan never took away anyone's

*legatum* = "benefit"

A legacy is anything that is passed down from one person, civilization, or generation to another. Rome's many legacies include the system of checks and balances that keeps any one person or group from having too much power in the U.S. government.



**ROMAN BATHS**

Roman baths have been found all over the empire. Only the wealthiest Romans had their baths in their own homes. Everyone else used bathhouses provided by the town. These were not just places for washing. Like modern health clubs and spas, they were meeting places where people could exercise, play games, conduct business, and visit with their friends. They could even have their legs waxed.

66 Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*,  
100 CE

property. And he didn't execute anyone. Even traitors were only exiled. His letters show common sense and human kindness. He was concerned about people in need and distributed money to feed poor children in the countryside. He wanted to be Rome's best leader, not its best master. He wanted to guide, not control. That's why he got along so well with the senators. He treated them as his equals. He wanted to work with, not against, them. When Pliny became consul, he honored his friend Trajan in these words: "You have willingly subjected yourself to the laws, which no one intended to apply to the emperor. But you didn't want more rights than we have—yet, that's the very reason why we want you to have even more." He was Rome's best emperor since Augustus and deserved his title: *Optimus Princeps*, which means "best leader."

A third difference—and an important one—was that Trajan came from the provinces. All earlier emperors had been born in Italy. Most came from Rome itself. But Trajan grew up in Spain. His father was a military man who served for a while as the provincial governor of Syria. His early life in the provinces kept Trajan from being drawn into the plots and schemes that kept Rome in such constant commotion. He was concerned about the empire as a whole. And whenever Rome's frontiers were in danger, he attacked.

Under Trajan's leadership, Rome extended its rule across the Danube River into Dacia. The conquest of Dacia added rich gold and silver mines to Rome's treasury. In 106 the emperor celebrated this victory by sponsoring months of games in the Colosseum. Trajan also pushed the imperial frontier into Mesopotamia (present Iraq) and all the way to the Persian Gulf. No other Roman general had ever reached the gulf. According to legend, Trajan broke down and cried when he got there.

A vivid picture of Roman soldiers and military life still stands in Rome. It is Trajan's Column, erected by the emperor to celebrate his victories and those of the army. Rising 110 feet tall, the white column is decorated with 150 battle scenes containing a total of 2,600 carved figures, each about



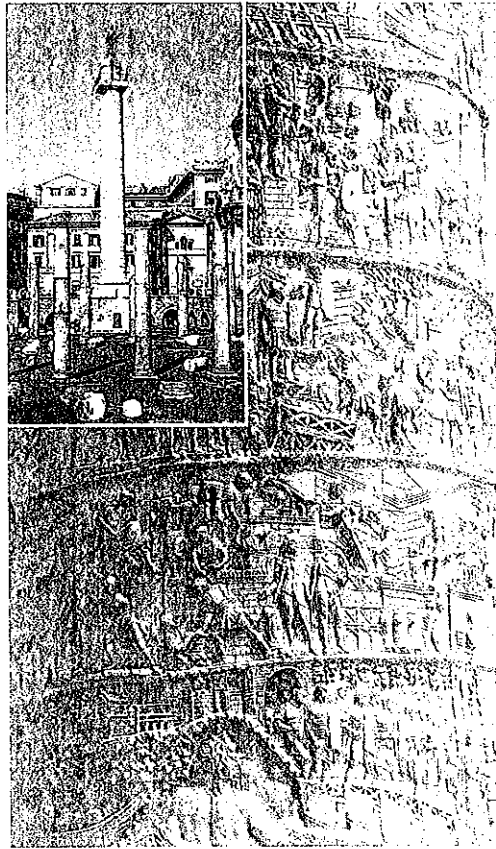
one-third life-size. The column shows us Trajan himself, addressing the soldiers and sacrificing to the gods.

In addition to uniformed, heavily armed Roman legionaries, Trajan's column also depicts troops called auxiliaries. Although these soldiers were not citizens of Rome, they made up about half of the Roman army. They were valued fighters who offered special skills that Rome needed. Archers from the Near East knew how to shoot with bows and arrows. Slingers from Majorca (near Spain) were experts with large, deadly slingshots. They could throw huge rocks against the enemy. Many cavalrymen were skilled horsemen from Gaul and North Africa. They were colorful and dramatic, dressed in full suits of armor. Their horses wore armor, too—their faces and bodies were covered by chain mail (flexible armor made of joined metal links).

An auxiliary soldier earned about two-thirds of a legionary's pay. But when he retired, he received a valuable bonus: he and his family became citizens of Rome. This was worth waiting and fighting for. At the end of his service, the soldier also received a bronze diploma. About a million of these bronze plaques were issued between the years 50 and 250. But only about 500 plaques have survived. Why so few? Partly because people were poor, and bronze was valuable. Sold and melted down, a bronze diploma could become a vase, a platter, or perhaps a shield that would be used to defend the glory of Rome.

One diploma that survives belonged to a corporal named Reburus, son of Severus, from Spain. The inscription tells us about some of the advantages of citizenship:

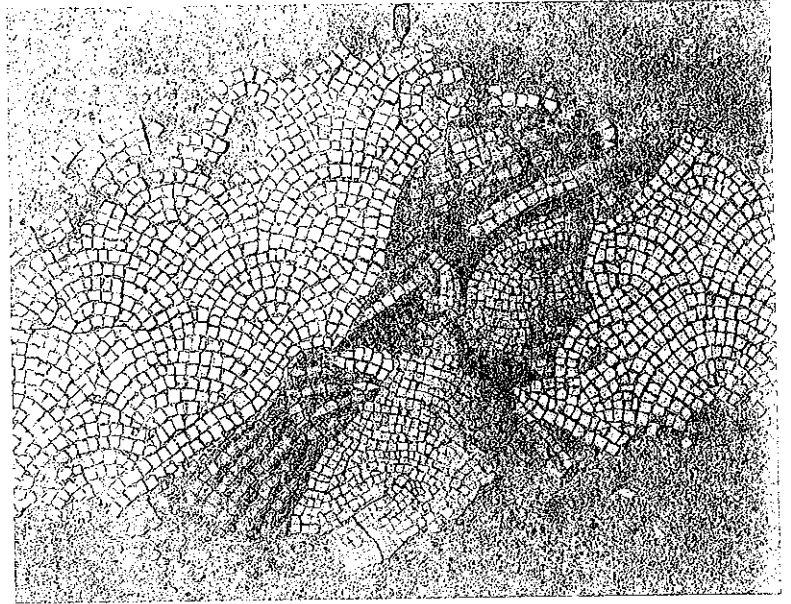
"The emperor Trajan, in his seventh year of power . . . has granted citizenship to [the soldiers] themselves, their children and descendents and the right of legal marriage with the wives they had when citizenship was granted them. . . ." Once a soldier had been granted citizenship, his children could also vote, join the army, and enjoy all the privileges of



A statue of Trajan once topped this 110-foot-high column (inset), but it was later replaced by a statue of the Christian St. Peter. The bottom row of figures shows the bearded spirit of the Danube River rising to watch the Romans build a pontoon bridge over his waters. About 2,600 figures cover Trajan's tall marble column.

66 Military diploma from Philippi  
105 CE

*This legionary soldier is dressed for a parade. His bronze helmet protects his head, face, and neck.*



Roman citizenship. Soldiers' sons volunteered as legionaries and helped to bring Latin and Roman civilization to their homelands.

For centuries, the army protected Rome's frontiers while providing a system for talented men to rise step by step, generation by generation. It wasn't an enormous force: 350,000 men to protect an empire of 60 million people. Size did not make the Roman army effective—organization and discipline did. Because of its army, the Roman Empire lasted for 500 years after the death of Augustus.